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Interviewer: My name is Alicia Mittelman; I'm a curator at the Estes Park Museum. Today is December 6, 2013. We are at the museum interviewing Ray Northcutt for an interview in the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project. This is a joint venture between the Estes Valley Library and the Estes Park Museum. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Alicia Mittleman.]

What is your full name?

Ray Northcutt: Raymond Earl Northcutt.

Interviewer: Ray, where were you born?

Ray Northcutt: Emporia, Kansas, December 13, 1930.

Interviewer: What were your favorite things to do when you were younger?

Ray Northcutt: Good grief, so much of it I've forgotten. Had a cat I played with, I spent time on a farm, my Uncle's farm. I liked animals, still do. I got into guns early, Red Ryder BB gun when I was seven, I believe. That tracked out into more serious items, but I'm not an NRA member or anything like that. Guns to some extent still hold a fascination for me. Right now my preference is my bow. I haven't really thought of my childhood, my early upbringing was, I was raised Quaker actually. And so that had a profound influence on me and to some extent still does. It's a very uncomplicated religion. When you grow up with that, I mean as a young child, it hangs with you for a long time actually. Emporia, Kansas then was a very small farming town. It's changed like everything else.

Interviewer: Did you enlist in the military straight out of high school?

Ray Northcutt: No, I went to Kansas State University, Manhattan, straight out of, I was the class of '49, Topeka High School. We moved to the big city when the war came along. I finished Topeka High School, went straight into college and I was with a reserve unit at the time. When the Korean War came along I thought about waiving and enlisting right away, but they said, "No, no, no, don't do that, you'll just, this thing isn't going to amount to much, you'll spend most of your time digging latrines." I thought, "Well, they probably know what they are talking about", but it turned out to be a little different from that. They encouraged me to stay. I got a crazy bug in me along about 1950, I guess it was, '51. I had made a trip to Boulder; I was looking to maybe going to school there. It's just too expensive, I thought, "Well later." That's when I began to get the idea of climbing. I looked up at the Flatirons and a few other formations and what have you. When I went back to Kansas, I thought, "Hum, I guess this really isn't the place I want to spend the

rest of my life.” I’d seen a movie, I think it was called “White Tower” with Lloyd Bridges. You’ve probably seen it. I thought, “Hey, that looks neat, I’ll try that some time.” So I got the idea, I built my grades up to a point, my last spring at K-State, ’52 actually. I would skip classes on Friday and hop on a bus and go out to Denver. I found out about the Colorado Mountain Club, they had a climbing school. I entered that and for every weekend, I forget, probably five or six weeks, I was commuting back and forth between Manhattan and Denver. They had the climbing school up at Turkey Creek Canyon. So that was the beginning, the starting of my climbing experience.

05:36

After I finished that semester, spring semester of 1952, I decided I’ve had it with this area, so I moved, actually moved to Denver where I could climb. I started D.U. [Denver University] and soon found out that was a terribly expensive situation. Eventually got so expensive that I thought, “Well”, I quit school, joined the military. Meanwhile I had done a few things necessary to hopefully get into the Tenth Mountain Division, mountain troops. You had to have, it’s one of those unique outfits in the Army, you had to have references to get in. So I got those, I’d done some climbing before, that is while I was with the Colorado Mountain Club and the school, etc. etc. I got my letters of recommendation and all I could do at the time was just put it in the mail, there was nothing automatic about it. My basic infantry training was at Ft. Riley, Kansas. They shipped me out to, what was the name of the place? A camp near Ft. Dix, I can’t even remember it now, Ft. Monmouth. It was a communications school. It looked like I was stuck in that direction, but one day my First Sergeant came to me, says, “Ray, you have orders to go back to a place called, “Camp Carson, Colorado.” So bam, I was gone. That was the spring of ’53 I guess it was, no ’54, I don’t know. The Army proceeded to teach us the military method of climbing because our assignment would be to teach other troops to climb in the military way. So we spent probably six weeks, all of us were x-climbers for the most part. Basically that’s it, we would teach climbing in Cheyenne Canyon and we’d give demonstrations to generals who would come through from Iran or some other place. We’d have on one side of the canyon across from the bleachers, there was a tower, I was one of a two man team, Andy and myself. We wore over whites so we’d stick out like, as we leap-frogged from the bottom base to the top, did that every day for a summer actually. Then when the fall approached we moved to Camp Hale. At that point they taught us the military method of skiing; I’d done some skiing by that time. Anyway, as the winter moved in we were settled in our Jamesway Huts [Portable Quonset style shelters designed for arctic conditions] and going out on maneuvers and what have you. Eventually a unit would come in, as I recall I think the 82nd Airborne came in. We taught them how to ski the military way and beyond that if they wanted.

09:40

Interviewer: Ray, can you tell me a little bit more, what is the “military way” of climbing?

Ray Northcutt: Very, very safe. I'm trying to recall the dimension of the rope, a very very thick heavy rope. With the establishment of a belayer on a very safe ledge, anchored in completely. You take maybe as I recall, about a 20' lead at the most and you didn't take long leads in the military, if you had a choice actually. It's basically it, the way we climb except that the military really didn't attempt really serious climbing; it was serious to them actually. Pretty run of the mill, I'm not that familiar with the classifications, there's so many of them now. I don't know what there've talking about when they say "a 5.10 or a 5.14" I don't know. We didn't bother with those things. I'd say the climbing we did, there was always a ledge someplace, cracks galore. They didn't choose a bare wall, they'd find a better way to do it, go around it. They'd find the easiest route up in contrast to some of us who, after we got out, we'd look for the difficult routes, the challenges.

Interviewer: Were a lot of these routes multi-pitch?

Ray Northcutt: Let's see, the tower in Cheyenne Canyon was maybe five pitches, I mean five leads. We called it "leap-frogging." I mean admittedly, you had to be careful no matter how easy they were. If you fell you were history. You don't fall off anything ideally. We had people fall, it was not a safe, it was not the safest line of work by anybody's. But we did our level best to teach people the safe way to climb. There was always, your best climber would take the lead of course. There was always a rope above from that point forth. If it were a two or a three man party, a three man party is a pain in the neck. I did it once. At first the instructors would lead totally and show them how to anchor in, how to drive pitons, etc. I think there were twelve different knots we taught. Double sheep shank, sheep shank, etc. There's where they kind of got us, I'd never heard of some of those knots. Sometimes we'd use most of them, but basically, basic knots, I can't even remember them now.

Interviewer: Can you recall what the rope was made out of?

Ray Northcutt: I think it was nylon, I think. Never saw any manila ropes or hemp for anything like that. Later on I would use hemp for stirrups; actually it didn't bind up so much you could free it more quickly.

Interviewer: You used the hemp for aid climbing?

Ray Northcutt: Yeah, when necessary or a prusik line. When Layton and I did the Diagonal we'd gain as much as we could before we got blown off by the weather, lightning storms, hail, etc. etc. Then when that forced us to rappel, we'd leave a prusik line and I'd use these Italian hemp ropes for the stirrups that I made to, it's pain in the neck. Again, something a baboon could do if you had enough, but it's necessary unless you want to do the same thing over again every time you go up there. That takes more time, I mean prusik line is faster, no question about that.

14:48

Interviewer: Ok, let's return back to the Tenth Mountain Division time. Was the military taking a look at what was being done in Europe? Did they follow the model of some of the climbers and famous mountaineers?

Ray Northcutt: I'm sure they did. I couldn't give you any names or anything like that. That's where it started actually, climbing. People like Joe and Paul Stettner, coming over here and doing work on the east face. That's where it started, Fritz Wiessner. I'm trying to think of some others. I think Gaston Rebuffat, I don't think he did any climbing here. That's basically how it spread; European climbers came over here, especially Germans. I don't recall any French. Fritz did some good work on the Tower, Devil's Tower. If you haven't done that you ought to go up there, it's quite a formation.

Interviewer: Where were the rest of the guys in your Company coming from in the Tenth Mountain Division? You were coming from Kansas and Denver.

Ray Northcutt: We had kids from, that unit was unique in that we estimated something like 94% of us had gone to college. We had a choice of joining up, joining the military or getting drafted. Most of us, I was in the ROTC but, I was getting a little tired of school frankly. Not to mention the expense. We had quite a few kids from Denver, D.U. There were kids from Vermont, New Hampshire, upstate New York, etc. By in large most of them had, that is with the unit I was with, had had some experience with climbing. There weren't too many really serious rock climbers, they had done it. We all took to it like ducks to water, especially in skiing. In the course of time when I left the Army I, to my own thinking I had to make a decision, "Am I going to get serious about skiing or serious about climbing?" Cause to my thinking, when you specialize on something, when you focus all of your energy and mental and physical on one thing, you are going to get better at it. Besides then, the skiing was not like it is now. It was a real athletic event. You lashed your skis, well we didn't in the Army, we had "long thongs" [leather strap which attached boot to ski], your boot/ski would be one. That's fine, it rendered better control but if something went wrong, if you took a really bad fall, it was pretty grim. It was just assumed that if you were a serious skier in those days, you were going to get a broken leg at some time or another; it's just in the books. You just braced yourself physiological to that. I thought, "That would interfere with my climbing." So I made the decision when I left the Army, I wouldn't ski and I would focus totally on climbing. To the extent possible I would climb as much as possible, like every day. When I lived in Boulder, I lived up on West Grandview, just below Flagstaff. I could get up on Flagstaff in five minutes, be on rock. Well, ten. I'd climb seven days a week, all the time. I guess that's one of the reasons, eventually when I started teaching high school, my first teaching job was in Montana. Horrible rock and no time. I had what eventually I would discover was an illegal teaching load. Four subjects, it's not the number of classes you teach, it's the number of individual courses which of course take preparations. I had four courses, I put in ten/twelve hour days. Then I got drawn into coaching as well. I'd played high school/college football. I wasn't trained to

coach, but when they found out that you had played high school/college football, “Well you can handle it.” [laughter]

20:30

Interviewer: Backing up a little bit, what year about did you leave the military, leave the Mountain Division?

Ray Northcutt: 1955, went in in '53 and got out in '55.

Interviewer: You went straight to Boulder?

Ray Northcutt: No, I went straight to Bozeman, Montana, actually.

Interviewer: When you returned to Boulder, did you find some climbing partners there in the mid-1950s?

Ray Northcutt: Yeah, former platoon buddies actually. Some of us got out at about the same time and we sort of hung around together, started climbing. I was always fascinated, still am, fascinated with Boulder. In fact I came out here one winter when I was at K-State to, I was a crazy kid, I ran down the president of the University, Mr. Stearns [Robert L. Stearns]. Gave him a call and he met me on a Sunday morning if you can imagine. Gave me the information I needed. I was very serious about making the switch, the transfer from Kansas State to Boulder. The whole thing just fascinated me I guess. But it just didn't work out at that time, but when I got out of the Army I was on the Korean G.I. Bill. So that helped a lot.

Interviewer: So you entered school at the University of Colorado in Boulder?

Ray Northcutt: No, actually when I first got out of the Army I did this sort of swirled around. When first got out of the Army I was married to a girl from Montana. She was actually from Bozeman so she suggested that we go back to Bozeman. So I did, I started school at Montana State University. I had two years to go, to graduate. I spent two years, started in the fall of 1955 and graduated the spring of 1957. There would be a divorce at the tail end of, in the spring of 1957, those things happen. To my thinking they are not tragic, you move on.

23:27

Interviewer: What did you study?

Ray Northcutt: I'll back track a little. When I was ski instructing and teaching climbing, I thought, “Hey, I like this.” First time I'd ever taught anything. For example, my last winter at Hale, there was a new outfit came along. There was “full bird Colonel” and several LC's, Lieutenant Colonels, Majors, his staff, the Colonel's staff, Sergeants, Lieutenants and what have you. I was chosen to teach them to ski. Kind of a soft touch, I met them at 7:00 in the morning, worked with them for about three hours and then let them go. I liked that, I enjoyed instructing, whether it was climbing or skiing. That's when the thought crossed my mind, I saw the movie, Blackboard Jungle, I think it was. It was in 1954, something like that. I

thought, “That does it, I’m going to try teaching. I wouldn’t want to teach grade school or junior high, but I’m going to teach high school.” So I went back with that in mind. I majored in history and political science and had a fantastic prof. Professor, Dr. Oviote. That’s when it really snared me. I was interested yes, but I didn’t have this burning zeal to shape young minds, I just wanted to teach. This is digressing somewhat, but the guy never used notes, he never used notes. He knew his subject so well that, he always stood, he ranged back and forth with his hands behind his back. He talked, and he told it as a story. The story behind the facts, everybody got the facts, that’s why history is boring if it’s nothing but facts, names and places. But if you explain why Jackson, how Jackson won the battle at New Orleans in 1813, down to considerable detail in a story fashion. The people involved and what they did and why, then history becomes, it’s a story which it should be anyway. Something besides names, dates and facts. The guy inspired me to the point where I thought, “That’s how I’m going to teach.” A lot of work involved, you have to research everything every morning. That’s how I started teaching. After the situation in Bozeman I moved to Boulder, remarried and started doing a lot more climbing. I didn’t have time in Montana to climb. I took off, I thought, “Well, I’ll beef up my credentials a little bit.” I wasn’t in the mood to start teaching right as soon as I graduated. In fact, I’d been approached by an organization, they wanted someone to run their climbing school and to guide, what have you. Usually you start looking for a job when you graduate, I didn’t, they came, said, “Hey, we’re a new company, a startup corporation, lodge, etc. chalet. Will you join us?” So I, “ok.” It was a good experience for a time.

Interviewer: What was the name of that company?

Ray Northcutt: At the time it was called Peaceful Valley Lodge. It’s still there I think. There are several chalets now. At the time they were building the first chalet, the old building was there, but they were building new buildings. It was a neat area, it was a good experience. Partnerships, I don’t know. You get too many in them and some of the partners start fighting and what have you. Their wives start fighting and what have you. It’s a long story, well not really. But after a couple of years there I decided, “Naw, I need to go, I’m going back to what I was supposed to do in the first place.” I got a job teaching at Corvallis, Montana. It’s in the Bitterroot Valley, south of Missoula. Beautiful area, stunning actually.

28:58

Interviewer: When you returned to Montana, did you do more climbing there?

Ray Northcutt: Some, I did some up high like Canyon, that’s south of Bozeman actually. Some decent granite actually. My time spent in Montana was pretty well consumed at making a living, either going to school or teaching. I still love that state, I’ve toyed with the idea of maybe moving back there. I taught one year at Corvallis in the Bitterroot and I loved it. I still look back on it as maybe a mistake leaving it because my superintendent, the school board members, etc., told me, “Ray,” this was as the spring approached my first year there, “you can teach here for the rest of your life if you want. We’d like that.” But something happened; it was about

March or so, March or April. Backtracking a bit, when I was beefing up my credentials in Boulder after I left Peaceful Valley. Nan and I, my wife at the time, we'd drive to Estes Park. Didn't have enough money to go to a restaurant but we'd bring a thermos of coffee and a couple of sandwiches and we'd drive out to, I think they called it Tiny Town or something like that, west of town. We'd park and look at the Loch Vale. Sip coffee, black coffee

31:16 [End of Part A].

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pretty nice. One time I said, "Someday we're going to live here, we're going to live here." That was my goal then. That March despite the situation, I liked the area, liked the people, I loved them. I still had this little thing in my head about Estes Park, so just for kicks, I thought, "Well I'll send a cover letter to the Superintendent at Estes Park High School. I won't have a chance because that's a sought after destination. Who knows how many hundreds of applications they have? But nothing ventured, nothing gained." So I sent it and about a week later I got a phone call. It was the Superintendent of Estes Park. He says, "Ray, Mr. Northcutt, I'm very interested in your application. Is there some way we can talk?" I said, "Well, not right now." I said, "How would it be if as soon as I finish the spring semester here, I come down and we have a little chat?" That's basically the way it worked. He says, "Yes, I want to see you." So I got sort of a break in the spring there, I drove all the way in a pickup truck to Estes Park, Colorado and I met Walt Edwards, the Superintendent here at the time, Sunday morning. We talked for a couple of hours I guess it was, and he says, "Well Ray." He said, "You've got a dynamite recommendation here from your Superintendent." He said, "This is one of the best I've ever seen." I said, "Well, thank you." He said, "I need to leave, I'll go down the hall and talk with the principal." I had spoken with him for a while also. They went back to Walt and they chatted a bit for about ten minutes, came back and said, "Well, the job's yours Ray if you want it." One of the saddest things I've ever done was to drive out of the Bitterroot Valley and leave that place. I still have friends there, most of them are gone too now. Some of the students are still around. You look back on something like that, I don't know, you make the best decision you can at the time that you have the opportunity to make it. Sometimes you don't even have the opportunity; sometimes you don't have any choice of matters. But I had a choice there. So I moved down here and starved to death teaching at Estes Park High School. Teaching, you didn't go into teaching, I mean it was a privilege, and still is of course, a privilege to teach at this school system. I think it is. Of course teaching salaries are infinitely better than they were then. Frankly, after five years I got tired and I went to another direction from then. Ironically some of my best friends now are former students. To me that's probably the best thing I got out of teaching.

04:10

Interviewer: It sounds like it was our gain that you came to Estes Park. You taught here and you continued to pioneer much of the first assents in the area, some of which are considered classics today.

Ray Northcutt: Well I don't climb any longer. I came back here thinking that I could, that's one of the reasons I wanted to Estes, in addition to just living there, I mean, look at the rock. I had visions or delusions rather of having time to climb. But I basically ended up with the same situation I had early on. I had four different courses and with the system I used, I got up at 4:00 every morning to research each lecture. I wasn't going to just, like some teachers I've had, they write something on the board, various things. "Now look them up." Whatever is on the board you end up looking it up yourself. Oviot, he told a story. I resolved to do it that way, without notes. He never, his head wasn't bobbing up and down all the time. I got up at 4:00 in the morning, researched the subject for that course. I had to read it first, I'd write it down, then I walk into my room at 6:00 in the morning and I'd review it somewhat, and I'd put it away. Close the door and from that point forth I'd walk back and forth across the room, look out the window once in a while. But I was telling that story, a lot of work, a lot of time. Eventually, for example my first year here the football coach was removed and the Superintendent called me in, he said, "In going through the records Ray, I find that you played high school and college football." "Yes sir, but I wasn't trained to coach." "Don't worry about it." So anyway I ended up coaching the last four years and I had a ball, I loved it. I didn't think I would but it was a good experience. Again, back to finance, we weren't making it. But I found something which I could. It would end up taking us overseas, but I looked forward to that also.

Interviewer: Would you please share any recollections you have of the 1956 ascent of the Northcutt-Carter Route on Hallett's Peak? Today part of the first two pitches are completely different than how you experienced them. A rock fall in 1999 has changed the mountain significantly, but at the time that you went or completed the ascent with [Harvey] Carter, you had attempted twice prior but bad weather got in the way. Can you remember the day that you completed it?

Ray Northcutt: First of all, the first time we hit the wall was in 1954 I believe. Harvey said, "Hey Ray, I've got a climb we got to really check out." I knew nothing about it, I'd never been to Rocky Mountain National Park. We finagled a three day weekend pass and I had a beat up old Chevy and we drove over here and packed in. He said, "Well that's it." It's an impressive wall actually. So we started and it really wasn't, the climbing wasn't, I was surprised it wasn't that difficult. They go up I think, first lead is vertical, second lead I think is vertical, then you make a traverse to the left. As it's turned out, I have no idea how many routes there are on the north face of Hallett's, rather the third buttress, I mean. We made progress, we moved up probably, I don't know, three leads or so cause we started late. But the weather came in and you don't climb in something like that. It turns the wall into a series of waterfalls. As quickly as you can you rappel off and we didn't leave any prusik lines on Hallett's, for some reason, I don't know.

Hallett's was to my thinking was my first experience with a big wall. Because what we had done in the Army, none of the things we did had that many pitches, that many leads. It made quite an impression on me. As time would progress we'd go back, that was the summer of '54 and Harvey and I had made the agreement that we'd hit it later on when we got out of the Army. I guess it was, we had tried it again I think in '55 or so. We got blasted off again. In '56 we decided to try again and we made it. We never got hit once that day. We got close enough to the top that it left quite an impression upon me. It would turn out to be, of the more serious climbs I did, it was the easiest thing I've done. In fact Layton [Kor] and I, as part of our training for the Diagonal in the spring of '59, we'd go up there and do it in an hour, leap frogging. Everybody with whom I've spoken, they've done a different route on it. The second time we did it, that is when Layton and I did it, it was to my thinking it was probably somewhat to the left of what Harvey and I did. But everybody with whom I spoken, they've done a different route on it, so the thing has to be loaded with routes. Take your choice probably. I look back on it now, have you ever met Pat Ament, he's written a book, I think it's called "Wizards of Rock", and he asked me to contribute to it. I'll give you a copy of it if you want. He asked me to comment on the north face of Hallett's, the Diagonal, and the Bastille. I wrote separate articles on that, not articles but a statement I guess you could say and my assessment of each. I look back on Hallett's now as a fun climb and what I thought was pretty good rock. I guess it's not as solid as we thought. Something like the lower eighth or fourth of the wall just sloughed off, I've been told anyway. A new route there, a new pitch anyway.

Interviewer: That climb is pretty historical because it opened the door to the possibilities of big wall climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park.

Ray Northcutt: That's what I've heard.

13:00

Interviewer: You continued to set your sights pretty high. You went on to the Diamond of Long's Peak. Tell me about the Diagonal please.

Ray Northcutt: Well, we got Dale Johnson, I don't know if he's still around or not. But Dale and I, Dale contacted me when I was still in Montana and said he'd like to team up with me and hit something called the Diamond. Well I knew about the Diamond, so we made the decision to do the Diamond. Regrettably Dale went to the Superintendent of Rocky Mountain National Park, a James V. Lloyd, and said, "We'd like to do this." Why I don't know because my idea, let's just do it and if they want to throw us in the slammer afterwards, ok those things happen. Anyway Dale went to him, he said, "Now wait a minute, you want to do that?" He said, "Absolutely not." He said, "If you touch that I'll throw both of you in jail." So Dale didn't want to go to jail and really I didn't want to either, so I thought, "Well, times will change." Someday I predicted it's going to open up. So Dale and I went our separate ways and I'd been looking at that, I chose to call it "the Diagonal" because it is a main crack going upward and diagonally to the left all the way up to Broadway. It's not as prominent as the Diamond but very smooth

looking, it's where the series of overhangs about a third the way up, etc. etc. I was buddies with Willie Colony and John Clark. They were the rangers on Longs Peak. The ranger station was a shack and we were good buddies. We usually drank a couple of beers before heading up the trail to Chasm Lake. Willie, John and I and whoever my partner, we went through partners like, whoever my partner was at the time, I said, "Look I'm going to hit that thing and I'm not going to ask anybody. I'm telling you but I'm assuming that we'll just keep it between the four of us, ok?" They said, "Absolutely." We'll monitor it, we'll keep track of you. Cause as I understand the main reason that the main reason they'd turned us, Lloyd had turned us down for the Diamond was, "Ok, if somebody got in trouble what are we going to do? Let them hang there for how many years?" They really didn't have the recovery, the rescue or the recovery means to do anything for anybody. They couldn't get you down, you were on your own. There's a guy named Willie, Tony Kurtz, I think. He hung on the Eiger for I forget how many years because nobody could get him down. He's just dangling there, swinging back and forth in the wind. I suppose that would have been bad publicity for the Park Service if they couldn't rescue you. So we had this little plot going on between the two Park Service rangers and whoever I was climbing with at the time. First time I hit the Diagonal we got up a ways and sure enough, we got hit by a whale of a storm. My partner at the time, he went back to Boulder telling people, "Hey, that guy's crazy. That thing is something else." So I was having difficulty finding, at the time, finding someone to. But low and behold, did you ever meet Baker, no you couldn't have. Baker Armstrong, have you heard of him? He was in the climbing school that I started when I was at K-State, one of my instructors. One evening while I was in Boulder, after the first attempt when we got bombed off the Diagonal, my phone rang and it was Baker. He says, "Ray, I have a fellow here, he wants to meet you and I'd like for you to meet him because I think he's what you are looking for." I said, "Well, bring him up." So about 30 minutes later this six foot whatever kid came up through the stairwell with Baker, he had to duck every door he went through. It was Layton Kor. We basically, to make a long story short, we chatted, we began to see one another once in a while. Did a little climbing, not a lot, I was going to school at the time. It was just easier for me to, in those years just to at a certain time in the afternoon I'd hop in my truck and just head up to Flagstaff. When the spring came in '59 we hit it every weekend and I hit it every day in-between, actually on Flagstaff. So Layton and I got along, we usually leap frogged. I think I made that statement, my last sentence for that book was, "Following the experiences with Hallett's I sought and hit more difficult climbs, actually, and apparently improved as a climber." I look back on Hallett's as a fun climb, a good experience, good memories.

20:00

Interviewer: I think that was incredibly brave. Hallett's, it's a confusing peak, there are so many lines on it. Like you were saying. Very courageous.

Ray Northcutt: I had in mind doing the middle buttress. At the time I couldn't find anybody to do it. I hadn't started solo climbing at that time. In the course of time, when I quit

climbing when I finally just, well I was going overseas. I was heading for Viet Nam and I didn't anticipate any opportunities to climb over there. I decided that someday I'd get back to it. When I had quit climbing, every now and then when I was teaching at Estes, I'd try and slip out on a weekend. If I had the chance if I wasn't out of town with coaching. I just finally just got so frustrating, I had been so thoroughly accustomed to climbing every day that I felt like I had lost an edge. I wasn't where I was at one time. I wasn't comfortable with that. So I figured, "Well, I'll take my ball and bat and go someplace else. I'll quit for the time being and I'll hang them up." But I really never intended to quit permanently. Before I'd quit I'd been working on a solo rig. The more I got into that, that's really something. When you take off on something like that alone. No arguments as to which way you're going or "Hey we better nail this," or whatever. It was a work in progress, shall we say when I left. I got up on one of Layton's climbs in Eldorado, I think it's called Red Garden Wall or something like that. I got half way up alone with my solo rig and I got half way across a traverse and the thing jammed. I couldn't free it, there I was. So I took my hammer, Austrian rock hammer and I put the rope on the wall like that, and bam, bam, bam, bam, cut the rope. And I finished with nothing. This thing had worked, I think if I had followed up on it, I could have worked the bugs out of it. When I stopped my overseas work, in fact it was Bernard, Bernard Gillette, he says, "Ray, I'll take you up Eldorado this afternoon." We were having lunch at the Ruby Tuesdays or someplace like that in Boulder. He said, "I'll show you something." He had a Swiss rig, a solo rig. I guess the Germans and the Swiss had really perfected several rigs. He says, "I'll show you something." So we went, he drove us out to Eldorado and just down the way from the Bastille, my route there. He just took off alone, the thing just, click, click, push, pull, just mind boggling, it works. If I ever do, maybe on my 90th birthday I'll come roaring out of retirement, that's what I'll do, it will be solo climbing. It's just less complicated. Harvey and I used to get into the some of the craziest arguments over various things. It never got to fisticuffs or anything like that, but Harvey and I argued a bit and so did George [Lamb] and I. [laughter] That's the way I'd go, solo, it's a real, there's climbing there.

24:49

Interviewer: What kind of partner was Layton Kor?

Ray Northcutt: Very good, obviously. As I told the people in Boulder last June, I said, "Somebody asked me," They said, "Ray, what was it like to climb with Layton?" I thought about it a few seconds, I said, "He was without question the most tenacious climber I've ever dealt with, he was also, I might add the most voracious, the most voracious climber I've ever dealt with. I honestly believe that had I called him at 4:00 in the morning the day after we finished the Diagonal and said something to the effect, 'Hey Layton, had a dream last night. You and I took off for Devil's Tower this morning and we bagged six first ascents. Are you game?' He would have said, 'Hell yes, pick you up in 20 minutes.'" He never tired of climbing. As I told them also, I said, "There is an old saying that years

ago, ‘There are old climbers and bold climbers but there’s no old bold climbers.’” As I put it, “Layton, boy, you sure blew the hell out of the myth.” I quit on that. He was the best I’d ever deal with. We had our differences of opinions once in a while. We could get into a discussion, to my thinking ideally you attempt to do it free, that is without direct aid. Because I knew of people, they just to my thinking, they went into aid, direct aid, too quickly on areas that really didn’t justify it. They become, like this fellow I described a while ago, with the drill. Good grief, that guy just, zzzzz, it’s not climbing. To my thinking the direct aid takes away from climbing. If it can be done free, that is without direct aid. Once in a while maybe I’d take a little bit too much time trying to find a way to do it free. Layton would get a little impatient, “Come on, let’s nail this thing.” It was a shame he had to end that way. It was not a pleasant way to go. To be that vigorous, in that kind of physical condition, and then be effected by that, I don’t know that much about it, but he had several illnesses. I saw him about four years ago, I was invited to a party in Boulder. We had a good time, went off to a corner in one of the rooms and chatted a bit. We’d both been in the Philippines for a spell. He’d quit climbing for a while and he got caught up into sailing, I believe, and fishing. I told him I’d lived there for a spell. We both liked it, but after they stole my car I decided, “There’s no way a person could ever keep anything nice in his house, it would just eventually, it would happen. It would just disappear.” It was a good experience, climbing with Layton. He was very angry with me on one occasion, when I couldn’t go to Europe with him. We had planned to do so. We wanted to hit the “three main problems” as they were called. They were three north walls, I think Pizbadille was one of them, and I forget the others. Herman Beal was my idol. I don’t know if you’ve heard of him. He was an Austrian climber and he was pretty heavy into solo stuff also. I finished my first year of teaching and I was so broke I couldn’t have gone, I was lucky to make it back to Colorado. He was not terribly happy with me because we couldn’t follow through with what we had planned to do. We were basically, truth be known, we were both essentially, we didn’t have the money to do it. Europe is expensive, terribly expensive. Years later I would get caught up in a direction in which I was just doing some consulting, export consulting, and I would go back and forth to Europe frequently. If they think life’s expensive here, it’s pretty grim over there.

Interviewer: Ray, is it true that Layton tricked you into starting the Northcutt Start on the Bastille Crack in Eldorado?

Ray Northcutt: It wasn’t Layton.

31:16 [End of Part B.]

[C].

00:00

It was one afternoon, I understand as explained to me, there’s been quite a controversy. In this regard, it amazes me, once in a while I’ll pick up a book and somebody’s quoting me. Somebody I’ve never met in my life and he’s quoting

me, bla, bla, bla. And he doesn't know what he's talking about. For example, digressing a bit, I've read one guy who explained that Carter and I took so long to make the ascent. Well good grief, when you get blasted off. I'm not going to climb in the rain. Ideally you pick and choose a little better than that. There are all kinds of stories about that one I guess, from what I've heard. But what happened and I was asked this and I wasn't expecting the question. That was the first question. Ron Foreman, he was a professional photographer and a student at the University of Colorado at the time. I was writing an article for Empire Magazine which was a magazine in the Denver Post and I needed photographs. We'd done a little climbing up on Flagstaff that afternoon and we'd finished the shots we were going to take then. He says Ray, "I know of a climb that I think you'd really like, Layton and I did it yesterday afternoon." I said, "Well, what is it?" He says, "If you're game, we can go over there." I said, "Is it free, is it direct aid or free?" He said, "It's free, no direct aid involved." I said, "Well, let's go do it." I had a new pickup, a Ford pickup truck at that time. We hopped into the truck and drove to Eldorado Springs. And he says, "Pull off here." I said, "Well, where is it?" He said, "There." I said, "Well, ok, you feed the rope out here." It's mostly a lie back. I did it, I got half way up and I thought, "Holy smoke." It was a challenge. I got up to the top and I brought Ron up and we stood there a bit and he says, "Ray, I have a confession to make." I said, "What's that?" "Layton and I used direct aid all the way up this thing." And that's what happened. I've read some crazy things, that I said, "Well if Layton can do it, I can do it, bla, bla." Foreman was the guy who was on the first ascent, but they nailed it all the way and I've heard this from other. I've read articles about it, that is people quoting me and I never, that's the way it was. As I told them there, I said, I turned to the crowd and I said, "That's the way it was." I'm told that some people feel I used direct aid at certain portions; I didn't take anything with me for direct aid. Every now and then I wish I could find Ron Foreman. I don't even know if he's alive yet.

04:35

Interviewer: Well in the end, didn't you feel a great feeling of accomplishment? That was the very first 5.10d in the country.

Ray Northcutt: That's what I'm told, but you know something, and here's what a lot of people. I wrote my coverage, my statement on it, a short story for that book, Wizards of Rock. I'll bring it out to you, be something for your collection here. While I'm on that, I think Pat Ament is a good writer; he's a very very good writer. This is a good book. My portion of that book, I explained the way it happened as I've explained here. I looked at that time, when I finished, went back, had a basement apartment on West Grandview. Nan said well, "Where have you been?" I said, "I had a workout at Eldorado." I guess my explanation is, I looked it at the time and I did through the years as an afternoon's work out. I didn't give it a name, I didn't register it anywhere, it was just a hell of a lie back. That night after I did it, I went down town, there was a place I usually drank a couple of glasses of wine. A few climbers got together on Pearl Street. I can see it now but I don't know the name of it. I told George Lamb and a few others, I said, "Hey, there's a whale of a

workout there.” And I described it, how to get to it. “You’ll like it, it’s something else.” [chuckles] I looked it as, and that’s the way I put it, “As an afternoon’s workout.” And never gave it a name and never registered it with anybody. You never forget something like that, I didn’t dwell on it. In the better part of 20 years, an Englishman by the name of Bob Godfrey, he was writing a book, called me from Boulder. I was living in Estes Park at the time. That’s when I was going back and forth overseas quite a bit. He was writing a book called, “Climb” I think or something like that. He wanted some input from me. That was the first, it was almost 20 years after I did the crazy thing, the better part of 20 years actually, as I recall. You don’t remember everything about it. As I explained, I hadn’t even thought of it much. You never completely forget something like that but you don’t dwell on it. It was never even discussed, and when he asked me, he suddenly held up some black and white photos. “Do you remember this?” Yeah, I saw a guy spread eagled there. I instantly knew what it was. I said, “Yeah, what do you call it?” They call it “The Northcutt Direct on the Bastille,” I think he said. It’s written up as the first 5.10, the limit of possibility I guess. I don’t know anything about the grading system. It’s the first 5.10 done in the country. That’s, as I recall, what he said. Then they started asking questions, “Well how did you do such and such or so in so. Good grief, after almost 20 years, no I couldn’t explain exactly how did this or did that. Then if you were to ask me how a certain traverse on the Red Garden Wall in Eldorado where I soloed it. I couldn’t begin, not with a gun in my back could I describe how I technically climbed it. Whether I got a press here and a lay there or whatever. No, especially after almost 20 years. So I don’t know. Climbers are different now, they are more. If I went back to climbing I’d have to find somebody and make believe I’d ever climbed in my life, because I don’t know what they’re talking about. The equipment, etc. You’d mention pitons and they’d laugh. That stuff we used, on the Diagonal for example, I had a belt and I had six categories of pitons. Three on each side, verticals up in front, horizontals, angles, etc. I had a selection; it weighed a lot because I had to take a hellacious variety with me in number because frequently nothing worked. I’d try one; it would bend like a gum wrapper. So I’d pitch that and try another. Finally there were times, ok, I’d hold the carabineer and guide the rope. But now they don’t do that, our pitons were less than what you had in mind. The Californians were a breakthrough, the realization of the ultimate reality piton, the metal they used was just mind boggling and they worked. They wouldn’t bend; they’d chip off the rock if anything. The rock wasn’t as strong as a piton frequently. The equipment now, like I say, I don’t even know what they’re talking. They use “friends” and “cams” and that’s probably antiquated also. If I do go back to climbing, my wife has made me promise that I never would, I said, “Look, if you cash in your chips first, that’s when I’ll probably start.” I’ve been thinking of talking with somebody, maybe hiring them as a consultant to explain to me the equipment. I’m thinking of going back to writing. I wouldn’t write about anything I’ve done or anything, but the sport. That article I wrote for Empire Magazine was a project for a creative writing class. Each photo demonstrated a given portion or area of climbing. Lie back or horizontal overhang or delicate climbing. Anything else you want to know about that thing?

12:41

Interviewer: Thank you for clearing up the record and I'm glad that the record is set straight. It's deserving of your name. I have one more question for you. What do you want people to know about the history of climbing in Estes Park?

Ray Northcutt: That's the first time that's been ever asked of me. I would like people such as Paul and Joe Stettner to get the full honor that they deserve. I think they climbed with a manila rope from what I've heard. They drove out here from Chicago on two Indian motorcycles. They slept on the edge of the road, those years you could sleep on the edge of a road without being waylaid, wacked in the middle of the night. I'd like those people to be remembered and respected for what they did at the time. Gradually as the decades went by people like Harvey Carter, Dal Jackson, George Lamb, Layton of course. I look back on the '50s, I remember for example another weekend pass which Harvey and I got out of Camp Hale that summer. I think it was the summer of '54. He says, "Hey Ray, I know about this rock formation, it's southeast of Aspen, we need to go up Lincoln Gulch to get to it." We drove over Independence Pass, at the time I had a beat up Chevy, we started up this road called Lincoln Gulch. I think it's a camp site now. In the summer of '54 we came up over this rise and I remember this entire valley, this area of nothing but a sea of columbines. There was a slight breeze and we just stood there and we watched that. We were alone, nobody else. There wasn't any trail. It wasn't a good road. I'll never forget that, that sea of columbine. Finally, "Well we better push on." We did several towers up there. The Elk Range, that's it, the Elk Range, they're south of Aspen I believe. We did several firsts up there, camped for a day or so. Good rock, solid rock. There were several things, I'm sure they were 800', they were just fun. Beautiful, beautiful scenery from every direction, you could look to the west to the West Elks, you could look to the south to the Collegiate Range, you could look to the northeast to the Saguache. You had a 360 degree range there of beautiful Colorado, fourteeners in every direction. La Platte to the east. That's where climbing started with experiences like that. I enjoyed, before I got into the technical aspect of it and into the Command, into the Mountain Training Command with the Tenth. I enjoyed walking up Elbert, Evans, Longs. This idea which Steve Grossman has, I forget the name he applied to it, he's digging up these antiquities of these experiences of us old codgers and recording them. Most of us at that group, I forget the name of it, they applied to it. Most of us, Dave Rearick, Kamps is gone, Harvey's gone. A lot of people that were there just out of curiosity to listen to a few of us. I think most of the people there were just out of curiosity about ancient climbing. Pitons, carabineers, etc.

Interviewer: This was at the Layton Kor memorial at Neptunes in Boulder.

Ray Northcutt: Yeah, that was it.

Interviewer: You've had an opportunity to climb all over the State of Colorado, in Wyoming, what in your mind makes rock climbing exceptional in Estes Park?

Ray Northcutt: The sheer abundance and variety. Lumpy Ridge for example, in terms of variety, holly smoke. You can find just about anything you want on Twin Owls. You don't have climb just the Chimney. Layton and I went up one time, West End, I forget what they call it now. I saw a picture of it back in there. Dihedral I think they call it. The main formation to the west end of Lumpy Ridge.

20:01

Interviewer: Sundance?

Ray Northcutt: Yeah, I guess that's it.

Interviewer: Sundance Buttress?

Ray Northcutt: Lot of times I've done a lot of things in which I just did them. I didn't give them a name. Like the Bastille. Dal Jackson called me one time; I was up in Bozeman in spring break. He says, "Ray, there's a route on Devil's Tower, it's called the "Solar Route" but it's all direct aid. The first ascent, did it strictly by nailing their way up." He says, "Would you be interested in doing a free climb of it?" I said, "Well yeah." "Well, I'll meet you down there." "Ok." We did it, I led the whole thing but now I'm wondering, "What's its status now?" Because I never recorded, I never went to the Superintendent; I never signed a register or anything. I understand there's a fellow by the name of Dingus McGee who's written a guide book on Devil's Tower. I'm going to try to run that down, see what he has. The only two climbs I've done on Devil's, I've done the [Fritz] Wiessner Crack twice and the Soler Route once. The sheer variety of rock here, whether it's the Craigs or Lumpy Ridge or the Park. Good grief, Layton got excited about something called "Chief's Head." I look back on it and I'm very very, all I need to do is look up at the Diamond and I'm a bit, I'm disappointed. That's one of my big disappointments, that I didn't get to do the Diamond. The sheer variety and abundance of really great granite in this area. The area I was climbing in Western Montana, I think it was called the Sapphires Range, just nothing close to the quality of rock which we have here. Some of those ranges are old formations. This should be a rock climbers heaven to live in Estes Park. When you want to get more serious about something then you can head for the face. I'm sure there's still faces out there that probably very few firsts around, but there's plenty to do. Can usually find a new route on just about anything. I'm sure you could find a new route, several new routes on Twin Owls.

Interviewer: You did the first ascent of the Diagonal on the East Face [Longs Peak]. You express some disappointment about the Diamond.

Ray Northcutt: As you know the Diamond was illegal at the time we did the Diagonal. In fact that was one of the reasons I did it. The Diamond was illegal, ironically I guess it was a year or so later, because of the first ascent of the Diagonal, they did open up the Diamond. By that time I was someplace else and hadn't climbed in a year. I had a job that summer, I was almost broke. I had to quit being a climbing bum and get serious about other things. So I figured, "Well, eventually I'll get around

to it.” But five years of teaching didn’t lend itself to that. U.S. Foreign Service overseas didn’t lend itself to it.

Interviewer: Thank you Ray, thank you for sharing your memories and experiences.

Ray Northcutt: Thank you for the opportunity.

25:55 [End of Part C. End of Interview.]

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ABSTRACT - Ray Northcutt is a pioneer mountaineer. Ray started climbing in the 1950s and is credited with many first ascents and solo ascents. Ray instructed climbing and skiing as he served with the famed Tenth Mountain Division of the U.S. Army. Ray describes his five year career as a high school teacher in Montana and Estes Park. The Northcutt/Carter route on Hallett’s Peak, the Diagonal Route on the East Face of Longs Peak, the first 5.10d solo ascent in the United States, the first solo ascent of the Red Garden Wall in Eldorado Canyon, and the Northcutt Direct Route on the Bastille are a few of Ray Northcutt’s famous climbs. Ray mentions many other early climbers with special recognition of one of his favorite climbing partners, Layton Kor.

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